

Research Brief

Dearborn Public Schools

DEARBORN, MI

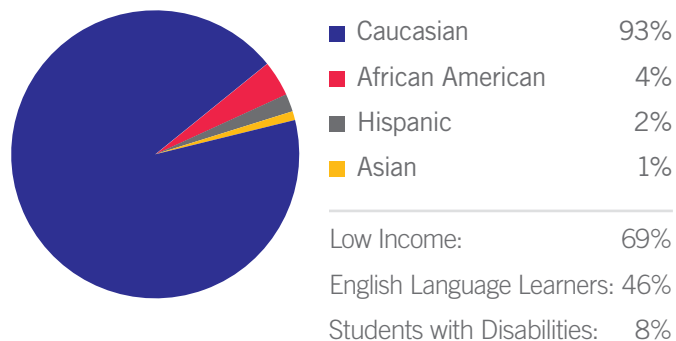
How can online learning increase graduation rates?

Challenge: Lack of academic success and low graduation rates for students participating in the district's alternative high school.

Solution: A small magnet high school for students, staffed with committed teachers and stocked with Edgenuity courses.

Outcome: After implementing Edgenuity courses, the five-year graduation rate of students in the program increased from 21 percent in 2009 to **80 percent in 2014.**

School Demographics



Background

Founded in 2010, Dearborn Magnet High School serves a small subset of the students of the Dearborn Public School District. Dearborn is the eighth largest city in Michigan and part of the Detroit Metropolitan Area. The school targets students who face personal and academic challenges and who have struggled for success in a traditional classroom environment. Sixty-three percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and 40 percent are English language learners.

Approximately 40 of the district's most challenged students attend the school, which works to graduate students within five years. Students interview for placement in the Magnet High School, where they work with three full-time faculty members. Students are required to do community service as part of the curriculum, and to take at least one community college course during their time at the school—though many take more than one.



“The program meets kids where they are and leaves teachers free to do what they do best—build relationships, and individualize instruction. With Edgenuity, our teachers can effectively meet the needs of students at multiple levels at the same time.”

Gail Shenkman, Associate Superintendent of Dearborn Public Schools

Ensuring Academic Success

A growing number of districts and schools are turning to blended learning as an alternative way to engage students with a wide array of academic experiences. The benefits of virtual learning are well documented, affording students—particularly those with academic and social challenges—scheduling freedom, feedback without judgment, and a thoroughly individualized learning program.

Dearborn Public Schools launched its Virtual Learning Program in the mid-2000s for students who were at risk of dropping out or not completing high school. They quickly learned that in virtual learning, not all programs are created equal. Graduation rates in the Dearborn Virtual Academy were low—at its end, the five-year graduation rate for the Virtual Academy was 21 percent.

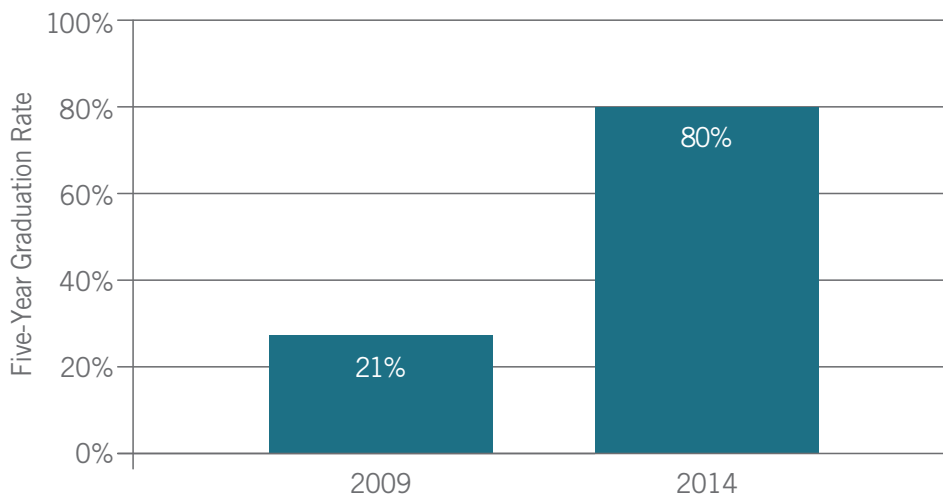
Perhaps the biggest challenge with the Virtual Academy was ensuring that student work was rigorous, says Gail Shenkman, Associate Superintendent of Dearborn Public Schools. “Kids knew how to game the system in the Virtual Academy, so their work was complete and correct—but they didn’t understand the concepts and they couldn’t pass the tests.” The result? “Failure that led to low graduation and high drop-out rates.”

To solve the problem, Dearborn disbanded the Virtual Academy and opened the Dearborn Magnet High School during the 2009-2010 school year. The school continued to serve a student population with unique needs, but the structure of the school day changed, and with it, the curriculum. Dearborn implemented Edgenuity in the second semester of the 2009-2010 school year; the program was a proven success for credit recovery in other high schools in the state.

“Edgenuity supports teachers and students and ensures that everyone is getting the most out of the school day,” Shenkman says. “We don’t have a science teacher on staff, and our students are in different levels of language arts, but Edgenuity makes it possible for each student to have an individual curriculum, and for teachers to keep track of multiple students at once.” As for gaming the system: “It’s impossible; students have to learn to succeed.”

Proven Results

In the four years since the start of the Dearborn Magnet High School and the implementation of Edgenuity, graduation rates for the students served by the school have nearly quadrupled. The five-year graduation rate for students at the high school is now 80 percent, up from 21 percent in 2009.



But the quantitative data pales into comparison to some of the real-life results. “Students are getting a second chance,” Shenkman says. In 2014, the high school graduated a young woman who had been homeless, and by her last year of school was working as a waitress 50 hours a week to pay for food and housing. With a 3.85 GPA, she received a full scholarship to Henry Ford College. “This is an opportunity she never would have had if not for the magnet school and its unique curriculum.”

The school received the 2014 Michigan Association of School Boards Education Excellence Award, as part of Dearborn’s eight-step plan to improve graduation rates.

Student and Faculty Success

“The students served by the Magnet High School are a special kind of kid. Many of them have challenges outside of school and have struggled in traditional high schools,” Shenkman says. But students are not simply succeeding with Edgenuity, they’re enjoying the program. “They like it because it respects their privacy—both when they succeed and when they fail. They appreciate the program’s individualized pacing and enjoy their success—because they know it means they’ve learned.”

At the same time, the teachers appreciate that the program is designed to support them as they do the hard work of teaching—working with struggling students to help them succeed. “Individualized instruction isn’t easy; having five students working at different levels of language arts isn’t easy,” Shenkman points out. “But the program meets kids where they are and leaves teachers free to do what they do best—build relationships and individualize instruction. With Edgenuity, our teachers can effectively meet the needs of students at multiple levels at the same time.”

And the district leaders appreciate that the program keeps students performing to the best of their ability while teachers remain active in the classroom, ensuring success for students, teachers, and the school.

Says Shenkman, “It’s win-win-win.”